AWAKENINGS

VOLUME 1

No poems can please long, nor live, which are written by water-drinkers.

—Horace

The poet knows that he speaks adequately, then, only when he speaks somewhat wildly, or, "with the flower of the mind"; not with the intellect, used as an organ, but with the intellect released from all service and suffered to take its direction from its celestial life; or, as the ancients were wont to express themselves, not with intellect alone, but with the intellect inebriated by nectar.

—Emerson

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I

Praise to the Man? That hymn to him who lives
and died in ages past reflects the faith
of those who knew him, saints who knelt with him
in prayer and pressed his palms in love. Today,
I make no claim to carnal knowledge but
with broken knees assume the posture of
petition, asking thee to grant me that
peculiar disposition of the eyes
required to re-illuminate the flesh
and bones of an invisible man's life.

Please, Father: send thy Spirit to inspire
me, as the resurrected Son consoled
his ten apostles (two were absent then:
the one who doubted and the traitor who,
for thirty silver pieces, sold his soul)
before commanding them to edify
the world with truths undimmed by human tears.
Teach me, before December dies away
and birthday celebrations cease, to see
his long-snuffed light—like Galileo, through
a glass, or like Columbus, when he looked
across the sea for signs of Cathay and
proclaimed its splendors to the Queen—that I
might learn to sing this novel hymn of praise.

Who first unfurled bright freedom's banner on
these western shores and bore winged liberty
to every nation, tongue, and people? No

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author of civil war can claim that he
accomplished such a thing—not Washington
or Jefferson, not Lincoln, Johnson, or
the Bushes. Presidents make governments
and governments make war; but their wars buy
too dearly rights whose purchase cannot make
men free. For men are not made free by rights
or laws and statutes bound in time. Truth
alone can free a man from slavery
and sin, and only after he had seen
the Father and the Son could Joseph Smith
republish verities embodied in
that vision and unchain the minds of men.

Despite his youth and ignorance, the gods
endowed him in this knowledge when the boy
knelt, stripped of pride, to ask which sect taught truth
and which to join—a natural request,
considering the frenzied period
in which he adolesced. Religious zeal
arrived in nineteenth-century New York
with all the ravening celerity
observed in birds of prey descending on
a tender, tasty little lamb, to stir
the ashes of devotion's memory,
until an ember of belief, thought cold
and dead with Whitefield's passing, burst to life,
igniting and consuming souls who threw
themselves from spiritual slumber in
the fields and forests of Palmyra to
the anxious bench, a consciousness of sin,
and new concern for their salvation. But
although this rush of penitents appeared
the earnest of ecclesiastical
prosperity and peace, a bickering
of shepherds—crooks assembled slantingly
in corners, they debated whether their
burnt-over mutton had been charred by the
itinerant enthusiasms of
Methodist preachers or, perhaps, by one
too many *Plain and Serious Address*

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on Family Religion, sent by the
Connecticut Society and its
Baptist equivalents—suggested that
denominational disputes would long
delay the advent of millennial
affinity in this American
pursuit of Reformation.

Preachers sparred
like pugilists. Their verbal brawling bred
new doubts, endangering adoptive claims
on Abraham, as cautious souls refused
to join, reject, or otherwise display
a preference for the different tribes, lest by
their choice they err, offending Deity.
Those willing to affirm a creed and risk
affiliation in this war of words
could only stand between the lines and wait
to feel that aural fist whose fearful blow
would drive them to their knees. Such struggles for
conversion often raged without reprieve
for weeks, extended till the Spirit and
its fruits retreated.

Late in the fall
of eighteen nineteen, Joseph entered in
the fray, expecting—even hoping—to
become a casualty of Christ. Nine times
already nightfall had pursued the light
from its assault when Joseph first caught sight
of that embattled canvas hall. The tent
was bleached with years of use but still blocked out
the sun's most brilliant rays, and though he stood
a stone's throw off, too far away to see
beneath the blackness of that sailcloth throat,
he heard its diatonic voice:

"Fear not
ye fallen sons of Eve! Cast off the gloom
of mortal woes and look for better days
ahead. Your fates have not been written yet
in God's great book of life and death; no man

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has sunk so low that he, by dint of sweat
and tears and toil, cannot escape the chains
of Hell. Perfection lies within your grasp,
if only you will raise your hands and reach
for God; the Lord says 'If you *feel* for Me
then you will find My love'—Have *you* reached up
to find Christ Jesus? Reach my brothers! Stretch
my sisters! Lift your arms and *feel* his love!"

Though Joseph's limbs flew into motion at
the frenzied climax of that sermon's broad
crescendo, zeal was not the force that drove
his pumping fists and flying feet. Concern
so conquered both his filial regard
for time and sense of fear that when he heard
the keening shrieks that sounded after speech
had ceased, he ran, in hopes of helping those
poor sufferers escape the torments and
afflictions that occasioned their lament.
Proximity, however, gave him new
perspective on their pains; no sting or scourge
apparent to his view distressed the men
and women writhing there in dust. Unsure
of how to aid, young Joseph joined instead
the circled throng around some ten fallen
bodies, each more unsightly than the last.
The nearest Joseph barely recognized:
his features frozen in a grimace, limbs
spasmodic, jerking like hooked fish—a clerk
at the McBride store. Next to him lay two
more men afflicted with the malady,
whose closeness caused the couple to attack
each other every time their arms convulsed.
Hands flailing with infernal guidance fell
on noses, ears, and eyes, and sometimes slipped
down south to knock upon the abdomen
or chest. Apparently oblivious,
these boxers landed blows that thudded out
a dull percussion for the howls and moans
emitted by the members of that band,
whose voices warbled variations on
a theme of suffering.

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Soon Joseph, lost
in contemplation of those three and their
companions, started from his scrutiny,
awakened as the minister renewed
his contretemps with sin: "These chosen few
have reached perfection, and their souls will find
God's rest on earth." Then, realizing that this
assertion might appear incongruous
with bodies flailing on the ground, he paused,
a solemn look upon his countenance
that matched the long black coat he wore. In tones
more thoughtful than before, the preacher gave
an explanation: "Having seen their own
unworthiness, they shrink and shriek before
the wrath of God—a painful price, yet one
that you'll agree is reasonable and
that must be paid by all of Adam's sons
who hope to taste God's milk and honey. But
admission to perfection's pastures can't
be gained by sinners half so vile as you—"

(Now Joseph saw that bony finger wagged
his way, now felt himself condemned by God)

"—unless you first incline your head, accept
his yoke, and join the fold by baptism.
Only the penitent, first justified
by water, can be sanctified with fire;
and not just any baptism will do.
The thing must be done properly, by one
who's got authority, and I performed
their baptisms myself, not more than nine
or ten short months ago," acknowledging
his groaning back-up singers with a nod
before continuing, "and whence is *my*
authority? From Thomas Coke, a man
ordained by John Wesley himself, who laid
hands on him as Moses on Joshua.
But you, sir," pointing to a careworn pair
of eyes, "what if your infant son were sick?
He *must* be baptized here lest heaven bar
its gates at death. To whom and what would you

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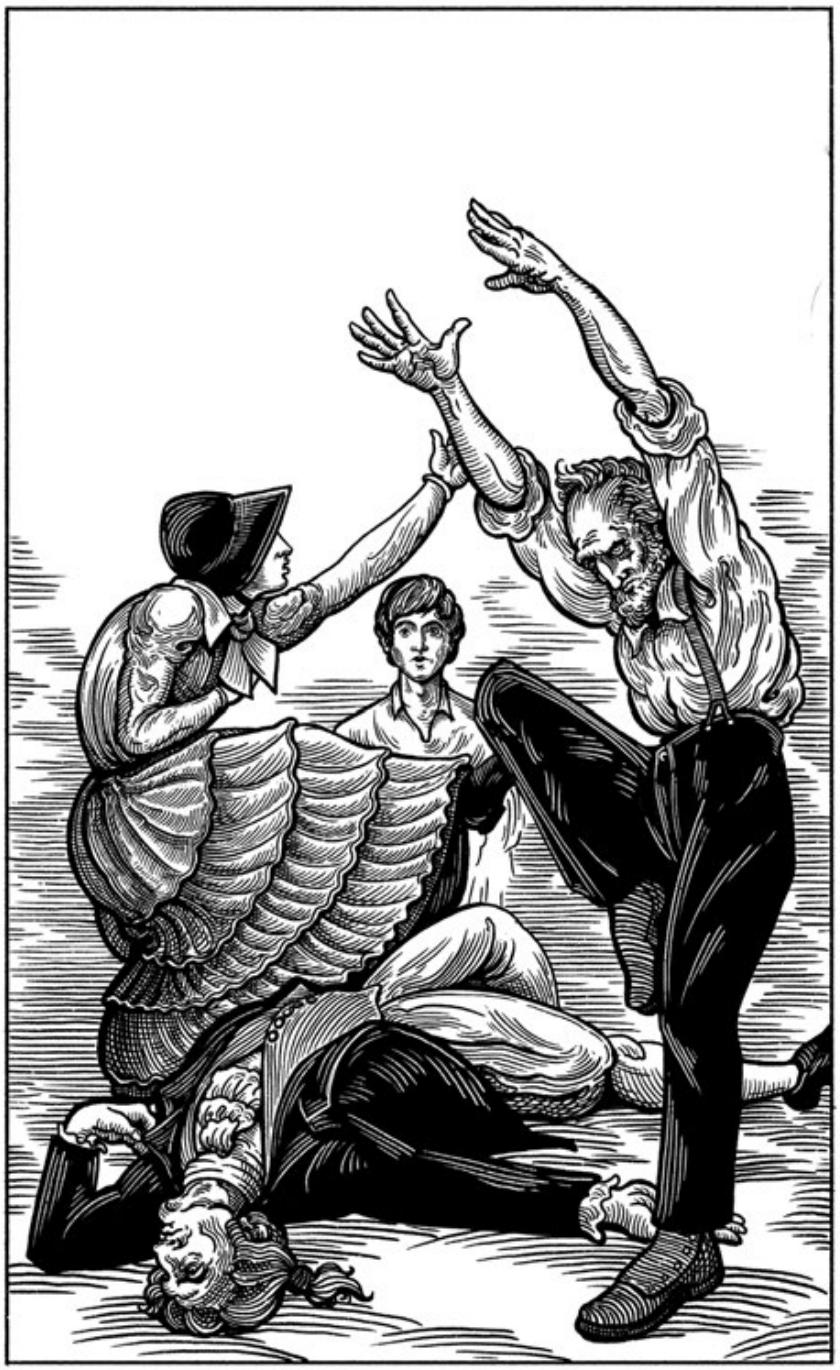

FIGURE 1. "A Religious Fervour in the Land." Godwin.

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entrust your son's eternal welfare? To
the Reverend Beeston and his Princeton-won
diploma? Or to Elder Hartwell and
the congregation that elected him
a preacher? No, but trust in Joshua
and Moses. Trust the Bible, which provides
a pattern in all things. Trust—"

Once again
the howlers interrupted, rising up
in unison to celebrate their joint
election. Each described a vision of
the beatific scene. Unique accounts
and voices swirled together in the rush
of praise to paint a vague, impressionist
collage of "Hallelujahs," punctured by
sporadic exclamations more distinct
than those that formed the standard hue and cry.
One claimed she saw three iridescent rings
wheeling in flames around an effigy
of human shape; another said he spied
the Son astride a chariot whose wheels
and carriage sawed the air with eyes that blinked
out bolts of lightning.

Joseph listened to
the strange reports of each, and when the last
had finished, he departed with the dusk,
resolving to attend that gathering
where next the preacher would appear. He left
the still excited scene content to lose
himself in thought, though careful not to let
his feet meander with his mind; the moon
was thin, and he'd be late for supper as
it was. But seven mouths were quite enough
to keep his parents occupied, and they
postponed their questions till the night's first chill,
and gentle scolding, gathered children to
the hearth.

Assembled there, they waited for
the question that invariably marked
the close of every night: "What good have we

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performed today? Don Carlos?" Three-year-old
enthusiasm filled his youngest son's
response, and Father Smith disguised his mirth
in solemn nods and twinkling eyes, then turned
to Katharine for her report.

A sly
expression passed across her face, and then
she answered: "My good deed was to forgive
when William tripped me in the orchard lot."

But William, who had been expecting this,
half muttered in reply, "Just sore because
you couldn't catch me," and his parents took
the bait. As Mother scolded, Father roared,
and all the children fled like tumbleweed,
driven before the storm that Katharine
had summoned; for, unlike that Gordian noose,
whose interwoven twinings wound around
and through each other in a fibrous maze,
inseparably bound, the ties that knit
a family together and to God
are simple, easy equally to knot—
and absent daily tightening, unknot.

Mother and Father slowly gathered back
their charges to begin the ritual
again, but entropy and sin had sapped
its power. William and then Samuel
gave rote replies, so few were listening
when Senior spoke to Junior: "Son, what kept
you from returning home on time? You know
your mother worries for you when you're late.
Did some good deed detain you at the Wells'
place?"

Joseph's hands, a man's, ran through his thatch
of golden flax and lifted up a boy's
face—troubled eyes of blue that sought relief
from guilt, a beaking nose whose size belied
its wearer's years, and downy cheeks too soft
to match the squaring chin they crowned. This man-

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child sighed, apologized for his offense,
and asked his parents for their counsel: "When
I finished all your business, Father, at
the Wells', I started back for home right off,
but out on the Vienna Road, I saw
a tent erected in the southern field
and heard a preacher there. I paused to catch
what he would say but then his congregants
began to shout and scream and drowned him out.
You wanted me at home, I knew, but they—
those folks were screaming like they fell into
a fire! And I was scared and thought they might
need helping, so I ran to see." With this
defense of his delayed return, the boy
expressed frank sorrow for the worry that
his dalliance had caused. He also asked
for leave to give a more detailed account
of all that he had seen and heard so as
to clarify his own inchoate grasp
on what had happened: *Why the wailing? How
had seizures led to Jesus?*

Father turned:
Mother assenting, Joseph painted them
a portrait of the pastor standing tall
and gaunt, surrounded by a double rank
of prostrate figures, towering above
them as a lonely mountain pine singed black
by lightning rises lordly over all
its neighbors which were felled by heaven's flame,
surviving still, in char. He told them of
the promise that perfection could be found
on earth and saw his older siblings stare,
astonished at the thought. The younger ones,
whose joy and hope had yet to be cast down
by Calvin, failed to see a reason for
excitement, but when Joseph startled from
his chair and Hallelujahed twice or thrice,
in imitation of the groaners' great
resurgence, everyone from Alvin down
to Carlos found the sight so funny that

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for weeks the cry of "Hallelujah!" could
incite a chorus of good cheer. He closed
his recitation by reviewing each
alleged theophany, unconsciously
accentuating the diversity
of every vision's version of the form
of God—full half of which portrayed him as
ineffable, ethereal, a Lord
of Lords unknowable; the other half
described a Christ consumed with wrath, now come
in blood-stained robes to castigate the world,
a King of Kings unloveable.

When all
was said and Joseph's voice had trailed into
the autumn twilight, there was silence for
about the space of half a minute. It
was broken by the tongue of Mother Smith,
a little member of the human race
whose unimposing size disguised both strength
and outsized influence. Her five-foot frame
held every eye as she responded to
her son's report: "Joseph, your credulity
in counterfeited spiritual gifts
distresses more than it surprises. Fools'
gold gleams too bright to be ignored, but you,
my son, are no raccoon. Beware the wares
this blessed trickster sells; the promises
extended by these roaming peddlers of
religion never pay in full. They pass
from town to town and preach perfection, preach
destruction, preach whatever will excite
a crowd; and once some ten or twenty souls
have formed a flock, this shepherd leaves to find
the one, abandoning his ninety-nine.
So even if I thought that he would make
you his one hundredth—which I don't—his care
for you would come at the expense of those
he's left half dead and half alive beside
the road to Jericho."

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So spake the wife
and mother to her husband and his name-
sake, both of whom gave grave attention to
her warm invective on the wickedness
of wanderers who lead their sheep in ways
not true. Indeed, the husband would have let
his wife's opinion stand as his but for
the boy's appeal to him: "And Father, what
are your thoughts?"

Joseph Senior shook his head
and let a playful grin unwind across
his face: "You children know that I hold no
opinions save the ones your mother does.
But if you want me to repeat herself,
I will. This Methodist itinerant
claims ten of his adherents now exist
in a perfected state; observe these ten,
their lives, their thoughts, their words and deeds, and see
if they obey God's law, persisting in
the hope you heard them share today. And if
their works reflect true faith, the words that led
them to this course must then be good; for by
their fruits shall they be known. But if their works
are those you might expect of any man
disposed to sloth and greed and lust and wrath;
if Thomas Auld persists in chasing girls
and kissing them or steals from the McBrides,
I think it will be safe to say that his
perfection has been overstated by
this pastor—this sly wolf in sheep's attire.
Religionists like him know no more of
God's kingdom than a common man who reads
the Bible regularly; maybe less.
Until that year when God's peculiar church
makes its appearance once again, therefore,
don't place your faith in ministerial
communications. Study scripture, and
compare its words with exhortations by
clergy from every sect. Those matching the

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example of Christ's apostolic church,
examine more minutely, but, let no
excitement cloud your judgment. Join no church
until divine approval sanctions your
decision."

So replied the father to
his son's wholehearted question, ending with
this utterance his deviation from
routine. Renewing former inquiries,
the patriarch turned next to Hyrum, then
Sophronia, leaving Alvin till the last.
Yet Alvin's answer never marked the close
of this examination; parents, too,
confessed themselves accountable to God,
responsible for using heaven-sent
and home-baked daily bread to let their light
so shine before the children, that they might
both see and follow an example of
good works performed with quietness. In front
of their assembled offspring, Father first
asked Mother to recount her day (a task
with which Don Carlos, whose assistance formed
the half of all her labor, gladly helped).
Then Mother gave in turn the question to
her questioner, and only after they
were through did Alvin fetch the Bible from
a cedar chest where it lay snug. He brought
the Word to where his father sat and gave
it up into his care, then crouched beside
his siblings as they waited for the voice
of God to sound a benediction on
their day.

With bluff expression, Father Smith
began The Gospel of St. John: *In the
beginning was the Word, and words were God,
and without words was not anything made
that was. And God is life, and God is light,
and God is flesh, but man has yet to see
the Father.* John's good news continued, but
the boy's auricular attention waned.

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His mind remained in orbit round the words
he had already heard—the Bible's words;
his parent's words; the words of sinners saved
from sin; the words of that itinerant
evangelist, which staggered Joseph in
the middle of the road of life. So deep
in thought was he that Joseph failed to hear
his father finishing the chapter with
John's promise, *Ye shall see the Son of Man*.

Their night complete, the children formed a line
and shuffled past their keepers for a kiss
before retreating to a counterpane
whose chill made sleep a slow affair. It was
an hour until deep breathing freed the pair
to whisper in the dark alone—as much
as you can be alone in any two-
room cabin sleeping ten. "My dear?" she asked.

"Uh-huh," he answered.

"Were we wrong to speak
so freely? Joseph seemed quite taken with
the Methodist approach. Should we have held
our tongues?"

"He would have found out how we feel
in time. A secret can't be danced around
indefinitely, like a maypole. And
besides, home is the place where, when you ask
a question, they should have to tell you truth,
no matter what. He ought to know that he
can trust us. He deserves that." Pause. "Should I
have said something about my dreams?"

"Tonight
was not the time, I think. You should, but wait
until it's just you two; an audience
of one allows both sides to speak without
restraint, and dreams like yours, gifts sent from God,
deserve the undivided mindfulness
of both a speaker and a listener.
Best not to trifle with the sacred, dear."

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Their doubts expressed, advice dispensed, they closed
their eyes with soft goodnights. But Joseph lay
in bed awake, on this night as in nights
to come, attempting to distill a truth
from words fermenting in his brain, until
exhaustion overtook him and released
his mind to sleep's embrace. Awakening
each day renewed the search for that true vine
whose taste would slake his parching thirst for truth,
and Joseph, fairly running to and fro,
pursued the word of God wherever he
could find it. He attended Methodist,
Baptist, and Presbyterian events
alike. Indeed a Sunday often found
him in the congregations of all three
denominations, moving with young men
and women in a group from one place to
another, listening to preachers teach
and read and pray all afternoon, for hours.
Their voices rose and fell from dawn to dark,
like small, night-foundered skiffs kept anchored to
some seeming island, bobbing on the waves
but firmly bound to those beliefs which each
could claim distinguished his religion as
the only true and living church with which
the Lord was pleased. Joseph identified
the practices specific to those three
assemblies, hoping he would learn that one
could demonstrate a claim to absolute
authority with scriptural supports.

The Methodists, in keeping with his first
encounter, trumpeted the virtues of
perfection. Perfect love, they said, caused its
possessors to rejoice unceasingly;
give thanks in everything; and pray from noon
to night. What if, on rare occasions, their
devotions ended in the muscular
exertions criticized by some? Had not
the Psalmist said that *the zeal of thine house
hath eaten me up*? Then let such beware

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lest they, too, anger God, as Michal when
she chastised David for his dance before
the Lord. Though Joseph little relished the
idea of thrashing on the ground, he could
not contradict the Bible; its command
to *be ye therefore perfect even as
your Father in the heavens now is
perfect* endowed the most remarkable
of Methodism's tenets with the seal
of sacred writ. Perfection was the nail
a Methodist could hang his hat on, and
though Joseph's cap had yet to find a home,
his restlessness had less to do with some
dissatisfaction at the notion of
a perfect man than with a chorus of
competing doctrines.

Elder Hartwell claimed
that God abhors the man who drinks a pint
or owns a slave and frequently condemned
"perfection" for its failure to exclude
practitioners of so-called social sins.
"A vice is not redeemed by public praise
or economic obligations," he
declared, and Joseph, who had read about
the Jubilee release of Israelites
and dietary laws for Nazarites,
discovered the impossibility
of proving someone right or wrong with no
help but the Bible. Elder Hartwell and
his Cold Water Society denounced
drinkers of coffee, tea, and alcohol
for "disregarding Christ's assurance that
a cup of water—cold, and given in
His name—could guarantee a man belonged
to Him."

Of course, the Reverend Beeston, whose
newspaper still ran ads for liquor, felt
obliged to rectify the errors in
his Baptist counterpart's assertion and,

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with that intent, uncovered Noah's taste
for fine wines—an affinity, he said,
the Savior justified in Cana at
the feast, his first recorded miracle.
The Reverend castigated, too, the flock
of Minister McCleary, loathe to lose
his reputation as a critic who
believes in equal opportunity
by silently condoning Methodist
missteps. Ensconced within Palmyra's one
and only pulpit, he dispensed a dose
of old-fashioned determinism to
his congregants, admonishing the church
of dangers on its right and left, as old
man Mapple might have told the *Pequod*'s crew
that Moby Dick swam starboard and a snow-
capped squall blew larboard, if he, too, had shipped
longside the stranger we call Ishmael.

Because his mother's purchase of a pew
beneath the Reverend's eye entitled him
to front-row seats, young Joseph seldom missed
a sermon, stalwart in his search for truth
despite the somewhat pessimistic tone
that Beeston often took: "*To me belongs*
vengeance, and recompense; their foot shall slide
in due time: for calamity is nigh
at hand. Thus spake the Lord to Moses and
the wicked Israelites, to show how they
were constantly exposed to danger, kept
from falling in the pit by God's mere will
and pleasure only. But, when God's due time
arrived, they fell, inclined by their own weight
to Hell.

"In like manner the wicked of
our day abide in constant peril, with
the sword of justice brandished overtop
their heads at every moment, waiting to
descend and send them down to Hell to join
the legions writhing there, tormented by

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the fierceness of his wrath. His anger, though,
is not confined to the impenitent
ingrates now castigated there; indeed
he doubtless is a great deal more upset
with many in this congregation, who
complacently sit here, than with the throng
already wracked below. For God is not
unmindful of your wickedness. The depths
are ready to receive you even now,
and your damnation slumbers not, nor sleeps.
Your unconverted souls traverse the pit
of Hell atop a rotten covering,
surrounded by innumerable points
too weak to bear your weight, too well obscured
to see.

"Beware those men who claim to know
a way across the fiery lake, who urge
you to rely on raised affections as
a sign of grace; the simple truth is that
enlightened minds, not raised affections, ought
to be the guide of those who seek for God.
Spontaneous emotion overflows
its bounds too often, and degenerates
almost invariably into base
displays of bestiality, without
regard for reason or religion. No;
no reveries so monstrous and absurd,
no acts so wicked and immoral as
those recently condoned by Minister
McCleary ever can be deemed divine
impulses justified by scripture. Such
attempts, to lull you into the belief
that God perfects his saints while still ensnared
in Adam's flesh, serve only to distract
you from a knowledge of your wretched state.

"Your wickedness gives you the heft of lead
and pulls you downwards with great weight towards
the pit; if God should let you go, you would
immediately plunge into the gulf,

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and all your righteousness and prudence would
have no more power to prevent your fall
than spiderwebs have power to arrest
a millstone's plunge. The earth—she would not bear
your deviltry one moment were it not
God's sovereign pleasure. She is weary, pained
because of your iniquities, and longs
to be relieved of filthiness and sin.
You are a burden to creation, and
the sun does not dispense its light upon
you willingly, nor does the air you breathe
deliver life's sweet substance of its own
accord. Thus far the floods of judgment and
damnation have been kept in check, but you
are every day more guilty. Every day
the waters of his wrath increase. No more
postpone the day of your repentance, lest
an angry God grow weary of your pride
and open up his flood gates, sweeping you
to Satan's grasp, where all his savage strength
will tear and rend you for eternity."

With this and like encouragements to own
his fallen nature, Beeston urged the boy
to join the faithful, and if Joseph did
not come to Christ, at least he came to church.
McCleary, Hartwell, and the Reverend saw
him often, and his mother's Bible did
not see him less. As dry leaves rustled in
the wind, they rustled too in Joseph's grasp—
mere whispers of the thunderous words God spoke
to Moses on the mount; faint echoes of
the still small voice Elijah handed down
to Ezra. Bible leaves beneath his hands,
young Joseph spent the winter wandering
in black and white. White snowflakes wet upon
the ground, black tree bones bare against the sky,
the world revolved from day to night, each dark
more during than the one before, until
December twenty-third, when on the eve
of Christmas Eve, the sun began its north-

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bound journey, shining like a new-made star.
So blackness grudgingly receded, and
the Smiths, as was their wont, assembled to
discuss the day's events and celebrate
with love the fourteenth anniversary
of Joseph's birth.

No gifts announced his change
in age, but Mother Smith made raisin cakes
for all the family, and Father Smith
allowed his son to pick the passage they
would read that evening. "First Corinthians
thirteen," said Joseph, and the voice of Paul
presided at their celebration with
a discourse on the best gifts granted men:
faith, hope and charity. On faith, the stay
of priests and prophets; hope, that death may yet
prove merciful and brief; pure charity,
without which kings and chronicles and laws
will profit nothing. Fortified by Paul
and parents, Joseph faced his fifteenth year
in all of its uncertainty and could
not know the gnosis he'd receive before
his birthday next arrived.

The new year came
like any other, at the old's demise,
and spring's bright hues replaced white winter's cold,
monochromatic constancy just as
they had for almost two millennia,
since life first bloomed eternal, in the night
of Bethlehem. Quite early in that turn
to spring, before the wood's first green was lost
and nature's new-curled golden flowers stretched
their leafy ribs, both Josephs worked the dirt,
beside each other, pulling out the gnarled
and twisted roots of trees cut down the year
before. But even though these stumps were dead
or dying, absent the appendages
empowered to draw life from light and lift
the whole to heaven, subterranean,

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entangled networks lingered, squeezing stones
for water and compelling Joseph, next
his father, to attack them with an axe
and spade until a team of horses could
exhume them from their self-dug graves. They strained
to clear the field for planting, sowed the earth
with beads of sweat, and hoped the sun would give
them bread. Then when that orb descended, they
exchanged their hopes for bread in fact and picked
their way across the fields to Mother Smith's
awaiting supper.

As they walked, alone
while Alvin romped ahead with Samuel
and William, Joseph seized the circumstance
that left him with a parent's full and un-
divided attention; he spoke and asked
once more for patriarchal guidance in
resolving his denominational
dilemma:

"Father, in the past six months
I've listened to more sermons than . . . than all
the roots we wrestled from the ground today."

Holding an aching back, his father smiled
wryly. "My spine has sympathy for your
poor ears," he teased. "But why the furrowed brow?
Have you grown weary of the Reverend's voice?
I thought that you enjoyed attending all
those meetings."

"Well, I do, but . . ." Pause.

"But what?"

"But I had hoped by now that I would know
which church God wanted me to join—that some
scripture or sign would manifest his will
to me."

The laugh that left his lips seemed to
surprise the slumping farmer just as much

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as Joseph Junior, who perhaps had been
offended if the laugher had not mused
aloud: "Impatient! So my Joseph has
become impatient . . . but, that is to be
expected. Even Peter, who had seen
the resurrected Lord, returned to nets
and fish when he grew tired of waiting for
the promised Pentecostal spirit to
arrive. The line between impatience and
an ardent zeal blurs quickly. I should know;
about ten years ago, I found myself
asking the questions you ask now. Like you,
I didn't know which church was right or how
to find the knowledge that I sought. I grew
disconsolate, then angry, at the lack
of guidance from a God who promises
to answer the importunate. I might
have lingered on in indignation if
your mother hadn't helped me through. She told
me, 'You know better than to reckon on
an answer from the God of Samuel
by such-and-such a time,' and finally
convinced me to accept God's timing as
a necessary stipulation of
receiving revelation. I resigned
myself to an indefinite delay,
not knowing when, or if, God would respond
to my entreaties for a knowledge of
His earthly church. But then, the very night
I made a resolution to accept
God's timing as my own, he visited
me in a dream.

"I rose and found myself
alone, surrounded by a ruined wood
on every side. The orchard—for it must
have been an orchard once—lay prone, its boughs
abjectly bowing to the ground's embrace.
No single cause had killed them all—on some,
the scars of sword or ax seemed gaping wounds;
on others, fiery tongues had licked the bark

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off, leaving only char; still others showed
no signs of stress. An inward rot, perhaps,
had felled them, or fierce winds from off the sea.
No sound disturbed the quietude of this
arboreal boneyard, and I searched in vain
for signs of life amidst the graying wood's
decay. The trees stood still, as though transformed
to stone, a suffocated, dreary waste.
Perplexed, I knelt and prayed to understand
the orchard's import—*Why have I been sent
to this forsaken place?* The answer came
at once, a man in white who smiled and said:

"'This plot of ground was once the fairest and
most fruitful corner of my vineyard, but
you seek what now can only be found else
where. Travel south until you see a hill,
three miles from here, and on the westward slope
you'll light upon a fragrant cedar tree
new-fallen. Search beneath its limbs, and find
the box of stone that's buried there. It holds
the bread of life—which, if you eat it, will
impart the understanding you desire.'

"I carefully pursued the course he set
me, but as soon as I had tasted of
the manna in that box, a horde of beasts
rose up around me. Snapping turtles hissed
and spitting camels bared their yellow teeth,
while long-tusked boars laid waste to hedges. High
above me, eagles, hawks, and ravens filled
the sky with angry shrieks; beneath my feet,
the dirt erupted in a flood of mice
and moles and millipedes. It seemed that all
the unclean animals of Peter's dream
had suddenly turned savage and instead
of being eaten, now preferred to do
the eating. I, unwilling to become
their meal, escaped this menacing advance
by fleeing to the west, and three or four
times thought I had eluded their pursuit.

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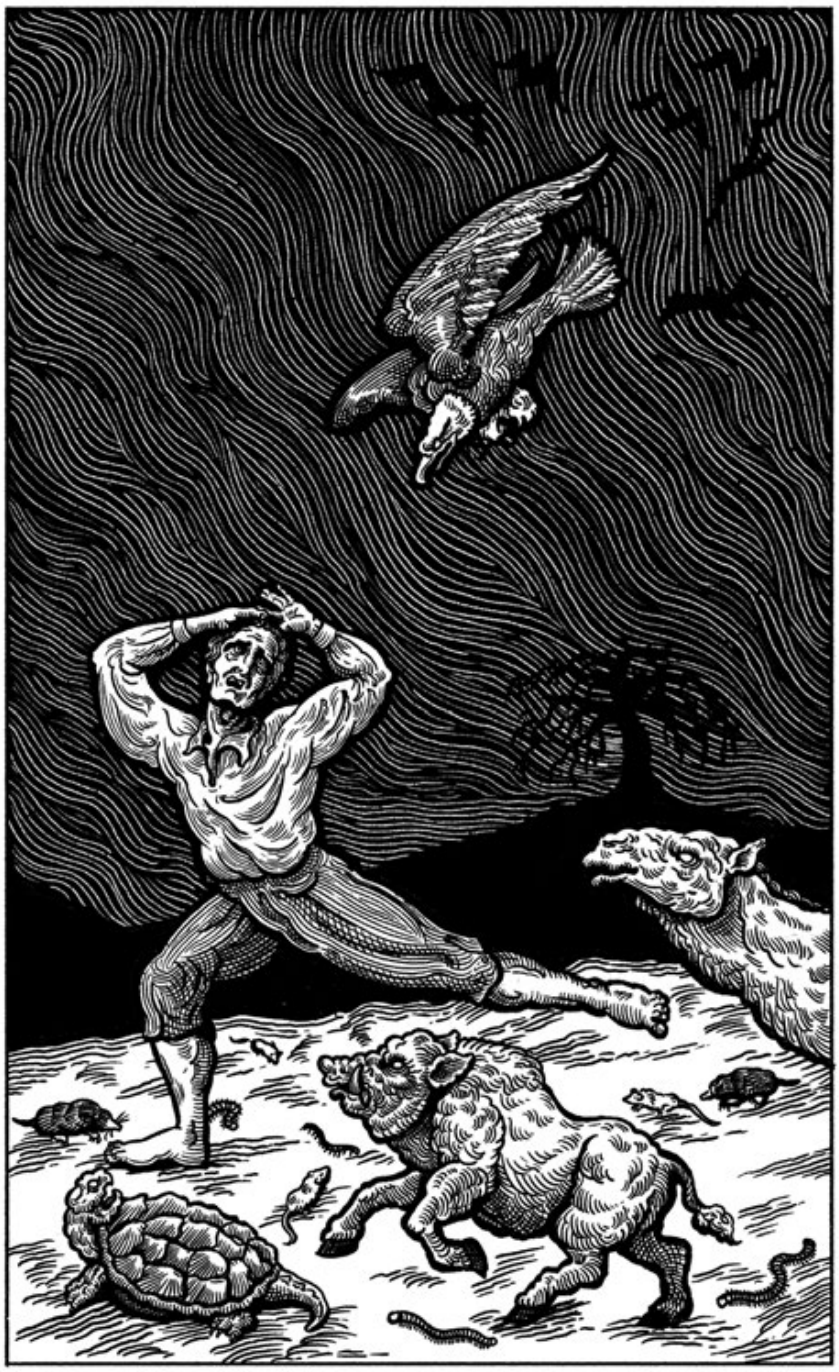

FIGURE 2. “The Dream of Joseph Senior.” Godwin.

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But each time, after I had caught my breath,
that bestial mob would reappear and chase
me from my hiding spot. At last I chose
to turn and face my foes, to conquer or
be conquered—either one a better choice
than running endlessly. A brazen trump
spurred on the mob; an eagle dove, its beak
and claws . . .”

He stopped, but Joseph, now immersed
in the account, rebelled—demanded a
conclusion: “And the eagle? Did it rake
you, Father?”

“That’s the pressing question, son.
I cannot tell you, for I do not know
myself; I woke before the bird had reached
me.”

“So? What does it mean? The dream must have
a meaning, right?”

At this his father laughed
again: “My name is Joseph, but I’m not
that Joseph—and unless you are, we two
can only speculate about my dream’s
interpretation.”

But, before they could
confer and come to a consensus on
the question, little Mother Smith appeared
below the lintel, calling them to come
and eat. Her supper had a curious
effect upon them. Bellies full, they soon
forgot the spirit of frustration that
had driven their discussion, and instead
they reveled in the promised splendor of
the twenty-second chapter of St. John’s
Apocalypse. They read of crystal streams
and trees whose fruit is ripe year round, of day
that never turns to dark and life that does
not end in death.

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Some fruit is bittersweet.
The end of chapter twenty-two, the end
of Revelation, and the end of Christ's
New Covenant reminded them of the
mortality inherent in a world
still subject to the curse of Adam, one
whose origin and subsequent decline
the Smiths would study in the coming weeks
as they renewed their constant sojourn through
the Bible with the book of Genesis—
in the beginning. But for Joseph, the
beginning hardly seemed a place to find
his answers. The beginning was a place
to find more questions; answers were reserved
until the end, rewards for readers who
endured the epic march through Exodus,
Leviticus, and Numbers. Joseph had
already heard his father read the Good
Book through from Aleph to Omega, and
he felt that inspiration would arrive
more swiftly if he supplemented this
Old Testament agenda with his own,
more personal perusal of the New.
To that end, Joseph asked his mother's leave
to stay awake and read by candlelight,
and as the morrow was the Sabbath, she
agreed.

In opening the family's
large quarto Bible to a random page,
as Joseph generally did on these
self-guided forays into scripture, he
imagined that his fingers were inspired
to choose a chapter: hand-selected, as
it were, by Providence. That night, by chance,
the spine fell open near the end of Paul's
epistle to the Hebrews. *Let us run*
with patience, Paul admonished, echoing
the sentiment that Father Smith had shared
that afternoon, and Joseph, who could take
a hint as well as any other youth,

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resolved at once to wait with patience for
the Lord to guide him in his search for truth.
That search continued slowly through the last
of Hebrews—hard words formed and re-formed by
an unlearned teen's still-halting tongue, with deep
and pregnant pauses interspersed throughout
for lexical digestion. By the time
he reached the end of Paul's epistle, these
delays occasionally stretched into
a fitful sleep, and Joseph would have gone
to bed but unexpectedly received
his second wind at the approach of James.
He read with reborn vigor till he found
the words he did not know he sought in verse
five: *If you lack for wisdom, ask of God,*
who loves to give, with open palms to all,
upbraiding not, and he will answer you.

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